



Best Practices for Rapid Content Development

A SumTotal White Paper

While eLearning content creation used to be a very expensive and complicated endeavor, new rapid development tools are making the process much simpler and less costly. How? Essentially, these new tools provide easy-to-use templates that empower you to create content without programming skills or a high level of technical knowledge.

If you are tasked with developing eLearning content for your organization, you might find knowledge of these tools useful—whether you are starting from scratch or repurposing existing materials. Through the use of the SIMPLE acronym, this paper offers an introduction to using templates for rapid content development. It also includes best practices and tips for working with subject matter experts (SMEs).

S – Start simple

While many of your courses will incorporate the same basic building blocks, your most fundamental starting place for all of them should be a simple design with simple objectives. You can always add items later on.

Consider finding or designing a basic template that works for each course or series of courses—and remember that your organizational rules and objectives will play a role. Be sure to allow yourself the maximum amount of screen real estate when you choose your design, so you have room later to add items that will make your content more engaging without having to cut out anything important. Bottom line: Don't let your design template distract from your content's meaning. Right side (Figure-1) is an example of a simple design that provides ample space for your content. This template is created in presentation software and later imported into the rapid learning tool.

I – Include relevant information

When you first begin designing eLearning content, it's easy to get caught up in all the really exciting elements you can include. Before you think about incorporating the flashy items, however, always remember to include the basic information that matters most.

Think about your potential audience. This isn't the movie "Field of Dreams," where if you build it, they will watch it. In fact, the courses you build can sometimes be targeted at an unwilling audience (such as a compliance course that's required for all employees). Sure, learners can also be excited to have the information you are willing to share—and that is a solid objective—but realistically, your audience will typically sit somewhere between these two extremes.



Figure 1



Consider what information is essential and what information would simply be nice to have. It might be crucial to teach a learner to do one thing, but only helpful to include something else. Ultimately, you will want your audience or learners to finish the course and understand exactly what the point was for viewing the learning in the first place.

Finally, consider whether the learning will be passive or active. Do you want your audience to sit back, relax, and watch? Or do you want to engage your learners by demonstrating a concept and then having each learner apply that knowledge? Adding interaction to a course will assist your audience in retaining the new knowledge and applying it in the appropriate situation.

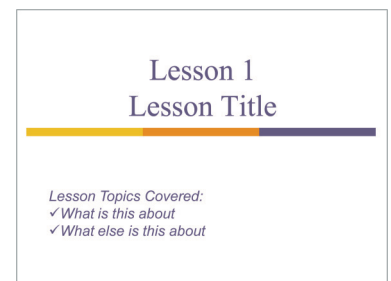
M – Meet your learning objectives

Learning objectives—which often become the lessons used in a course—should be the driving factors behind your design. As such, it is imperative that you know up front what you are trying to accomplish. Are you trying only to convey information? Or do you want the learner to be introduced to a task? Perhaps you want the learner to practice making a decision using the information a course provides. The practice will assist the learner in using those same skills in his or her work environment.

For example: You could use a course simply to tell a group of nurses that wearing a mask will reduce the risk of contracting germs. Alternatively, you could let each nurse make decisions within an eLearning course that clearly demonstrate the consequences of not wearing a mask. Whichever direction you choose, it is important to decide on your objectives before you begin creating courses. You may also want to communicate upcoming lesson agendas to learners, so they know what to expect in future courses.

Right side (Figure-2) is an example of a lesson slide showing both the title and the topics that will be covered in the lesson.

Figure 2

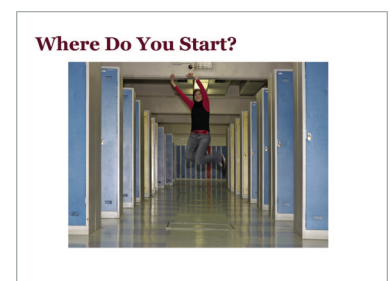


P – Please your audience

When you create a course or learning experience, you have no guarantee your learners will appreciate it. They might not start a course—or if they start it, they might not finish it. Students face numerous distractions, especially when they're seated at their own computers, where email and instant messages are constantly running. Keep this in mind when you are creating courses that are to be recorded or even delivered via a Web conference. Some element of the screen should change every 3 – 5 minutes. It is essential that you convey the objectives of the course, but make efforts to be creative in how you present the information.

For example, the slide right side (Figure-3) could have been plain text. By using pictures or symbols to convey concepts, however, little or no explanation is needed. When you look at the person in the photo, it is clear she is happy about something.

Figure 3



L – Later add flair

After all the basics are covered, you're ready to add more exciting elements to your eLearning course. These items are not required or essential to learn but can assist in adding emphasis or preventing boredom. In other words, these items add flair—whether by adding highlights that draw the audience's attention to items on the screen, or by enabling game-like interaction.

E - Engage to ensure understanding

Adding engagement or interaction to your courses will allow learners to test the application of their newfound knowledge. Why does this matter? Because there is a difference between simply repeating facts and being able to apply knowledge practically in the work environment.

Some content creation tools provide the ability to branch, which allows learners to make choices that will send them to different parts of a course. The example right side (Figure-4) is a simple interaction that stops the course until the learner responds to the question.

Templates

Templates are key to rapid development. Once a template is built, it can shorten the development time of future courses significantly. Templates also assist in ensuring a consistent look and feel for a series of courses. And, beyond the look and feel of the template, there are other standard items that might need to be included in every course—some of which are required, and some that might simply be nice to include. You may also want to use the same look and feel in the design, color, background or graphics for your templates.

Consider the following:

- Standard beginnings
- Standard endings
- Agenda or lessons
- Course prerequisites
- Summary or recap
- Reviews or questions

Tips for working with Subject Matter Experts (SMEs)

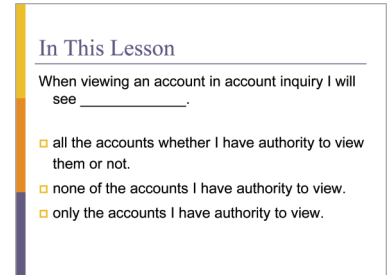
SMEs are useful while creating learning experiences because they are the experts in subject matter; however, they are not expected to know how to create eLearning materials.

A SME should have:

- Expertise in the relevant course area
- Experience in the relevant course area
- The influence or respect needed to accomplish your learning objectives
- Interest in assisting you with your project
- Availability to complete the project within your timeline

After you've established which particular SME will work with you on your course, meet with that person and help him or her understand the process of content creation on which you're about to embark. Be sure to communicate your expectations, along with information about the process and how much you will rely on your SME to help you meet your project deadline. You may need to familiarize SMEs with your software tools. If you spend a little time with them during the process you will save yourself lots of time in the end.

Figure 4



The screenshot shows a course interface with a title bar 'In This Lesson'. Below the title bar is a question: 'When viewing an account in account inquiry I will see _____.' There are three radio button options: 'all the accounts whether I have authority to view them or not.', 'none of the accounts I have authority to view.', and 'only the accounts I have authority to view.' The third option is selected.

Conclusion

eLearning content is now easier to create than ever before—but this does not mean you should ignore best practices for content creation. Whether you are converting instructor-led training to eLearning or you're starting from scratch, starting with the SIMPLE method can help ensure you always begin with the required basics in place.

As you prepare to move beyond the basics, look for ideas that will expand or enhance your eLearning program. Review some successful eLearning content examples, and consider how you might simulate the features and interactions you find. In addition, many organizations offering free membership enable you to see and share content ideas with your peers. This type of real-world connection can help you gain invaluable insight for your eLearning programs.

More Information

For more information, send an email to connect@sumtotalsystems.com

About SumTotal

SumTotal Systems, Inc. is the global leader in complete learning and talent management software that enables organizations to more effectively drive business strategy and growth. Recognized by industry analysts as the most comprehensive solution, SumTotal provides full employee lifecycle management, including a core system of record, from a single provider for improved business intelligence. The company offers customers of all sizes and in all industries the most flexibility and choice with multiple purchase, configuration, and deployment options. We have increased the performance of the world's largest organizations including Sony Electronics (NYSE: SNE), AstraZeneca (NYSE: AZN [ADR]; London: AZN), Amway, GKN (London: GKN), and Seagate (NYSE: STX).

For more information, or to request a demo, please call +1 (866) 768-6825 (US / Canada), +1 (352) 264-2800 (international) or visit www.sumtotalsystems.com



Corporate Headquarters

SumTotal Systems, Inc.
2850 NW 43rd Street
Suite #200
Gainesville, FL 32606 USA
Phone: +1 352 264 2800
Fax: +1 352 264 2801

EMEA

SumTotal Systems, UK
59-60 Thames Street
Windsor, Berkshire
United Kingdom, SL4 1TX
Phone: +44 (0) 1753 211 900
Fax: +44 (0) 1753 211 901

APAC

SumTotal Systems India Pvt. Ltd.
7th Floor Maximus Towers
Building 2B, Mind Space
Raheja IT Park, Cyberabad
Hyderabad, AP-500081, India
Phone: +91 (0) 40 6695 0000
Fax: +91 (0) 40 2311 2727

© 2011 SumTotal Systems, Inc. All rights reserved. SumTotal, and the SumTotal logo, are registered trademarks or trademarks of SumTotal Systems, Inc. and/or its affiliates in the United States and/or other countries. Other names may be trademarks of their respective owners. 11_0509LS